

The Whole Enchilada

Having been raised on the border in the El Paso area, I take my Mexican food very seriously. I do not know anyone that comes from that part of Texas that can't endure more than a week without a fix of that type of food and the delicious combination of ingredients that starts with tortillas. But traveling around the country over the years, I have noticed the different varieties and tastes that have developed regarding the preparation of the famous dish we know as The enchilada.

As a boy, I used to marvel at my mother preparing this delicacy at home. She would take out a corn tortilla, drop it ever so carefully into hot grease for just a few seconds, then take it out and immediately place it into a pan of a spicy hot red chili sauce that had the color of a big ripe red tomato. Next then, she would repetitiously begin stacking these pancake style on a plate, all the while inserting layers of grated cheese and chopped onions in between. The numbers of layers would depend on the individual's choices after responding to the perennial question, "How many do you want?" Sometimes these bright glowing red towers of food trimmed in yellow and white by the onions and cheese and encircled by a ring of crisp finely chopped lettuce would be eaten immediately, but if prepared for a large crowd, the stacks would be placed in the oven to be kept warm till all could be served. Complementing this creation, the pile would often also be topped with a preference of a fried egg. Never having known any better, I assumed that that was the way that all enchiladas were to be made and that was that.

In the late 30's and during the 40's there were perhaps many Mexican restaurants in El Paso proper, but non-so famous as a small place in the Five Points area of the border city that went by the name of Ashley's. This was my first foray into a place outside my home, and the small café just off of Piedras Avenue served up enchiladas very similar to that we had at home, also complemented by tamales, Spanish rice, and refried mashed beans named refritos. Ashley's was in those days, considered to be the Mecca of cafe Mexican food, and was so popular that the company eventually grew into a huge business of canning much of the food sold there. The company got so big nationwide that Ashley soon closed his small cafe and dealt solely with the sale of his prepared products, building a large plant out on the sandhills just north of the city.

When my family moved down the valley to a nearby town that strangers would incorrectly pronounce Wy Sleta (Ysleta), we discovered a small place called Cip and Manny's Diner on Highway 80. This very small and cozy restaurant was always crowded and became the in place to eat Mexican food in the valley for several years. Why, for 90 cents you could get about all the enchiladas you could eat and it also served them pancake style, so I really never knew any difference for a long time. When Cip and Manny left town to open a place in California, part of the family then started a place down the same highway called Carmen's not far away, and this establishment was king of the Mexican food restaurants for many years afterward. (Somewhere in that time period, however, the red enchilada was rolled tightly with the cheese and onion ingredients inside and placed neatly in rows but the red sauce was to remain.) Many

Mexican food restaurants were to follow, dishing out mostly the same fare that Ashley's, Cip and Manny, and Carmen's had served and the menus became more sophisticated. However, the red enchilada endured in the El Paso area and has remained basically the same to this day.

It was some time before I discovered that not everyone understood our red enchiladas. Traveling to Dallas as a young man, my cousins there would take me to a place there called El Fenix and to my horror when ordering enchiladas, I discovered these rolls of tortillas were smothered in something that looked like beans and ground beef in a bland brown sauce. Upon questioning the waiter I was told in no certain terms that it was chili enchilada sauce. Now, I had tasted the fiery chili con carne verde and chili con carne rojo in El Paso that would make a Pancho Villa drink a gallon of water afterward, but real chili sauce?...no way..no how...this food to me tasted terrible and had no fire in it. What had happened to my Enchiladas.? The ones with spicy red sauce? My Big D relatives that that was the way they made enchiladas and they didn't like them any other way and soundly chastised me. "We want them with meat, not spicy, and further more, those things you call enchiladas in El Paso are too hot and we can't eat them. It burns our mouth."

It was one of my first realizations that people really do have different tastes in Mexican food, and if you have never known enchiladas any other way, that's the way you expect them to be. In other words, when one is ordering something familiar...they want to dance with the enchilada that brung them! In fact, I vividly remember now that we would never go to Mexico for Mexican food while being so close to Juarez because they wrapped tortillas in all kinds of unmentionable things and almost never used the red sauce. We always heard "You never go to Mexico to eat Mexican food" It seemed strange but just a scant distance away across the Rio Grande the food was truly different and we mainly went to restaurants there for steaks and the famous Boquillas bass fish.

Engaged in a lively conversation with a popular local restaurateur in Houston recently one day, I commented about the different tastes in Mexican food in this part of the country. This aquantaince of mine had an upscale Mexican style restaurant so popular in Houston that it is always packed and there is no name on the outside. I was shocked that he had never heard of the red chile sauce that is served in West Texas and New Mexico and that he politely reiterated that his customers would probably never eat it if he served such a fare. Some do serve a red sauce here, but it is called ranchera or tomatillo. In my opinion, it is flat and nowhere as tasty or spicy as my beloved liquid from the long red chile pepper such as that grown in places like Hatch New Mexico. Nowadays, you will find enchiladas stuffed with chicken, spinach, pork and many other ingredients. I have even been served duck enchiladas in Colorado. I have to admit some of the variations taste pretty good, but I have a hard time calling them enchiladas because I am still so used to a particular taste, and fervently search for an area eatery that will satisfy my peculiar West Texas palate.

All is not lost however, because there can be found cans of Old El Paso, La Victoria and Hatch red enchilada sauce available in most stores everywhere, and at home it is still

possible to capture that taste of yesteryear by preparing my own style of enchiladas pancake style. While on my annual ski outing in Colorado with a group of Yankees from Michigan, I often do an apres-ski fast snack preparation called instant enchiladas. Taking a bowl of Doritos, sprinkled with onions and lots of grated cheese, I pour over the whole mess a generous portion of red enchilada sauce, and pop in into the microwave. Its not definitely the real thing but close to the undeniable taste of my beloved El Paso concoction.... but...I always get at least one comment from someone in the group from a place other than West Texas who manages to cry out after sampling my fare..."OK Jim, these are pretty good but...Where's the beef?"

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